Book club in a Bag

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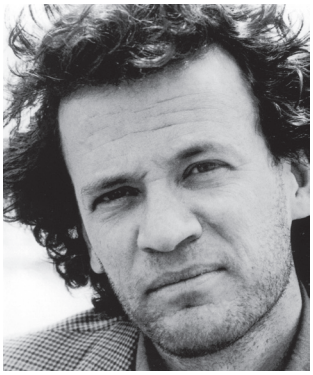
Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: Life of Pi

Author: Yann Martel

As an adult, he has travelled the globe, spending time in Iran, Turkey and India. After studying philosophy at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, at age 27 he embarked on a writing career. Living in or visiting many cultures influenced his writing, providing the rich cultural background mix in *Life of Pi* that garnered him the prestigious 2002 Booker Prize for fiction. To write *Life of Pi*, Martel spent six months in India visiting mosques, temples, churches and zoos, and then an entire year reading religious texts and castoff stories. After the research, the actual writing required two more years.

Name: Yann Martel
Born: June 25, 1963, in Salamanca, Spain
Education: Trent University, 1981-84 and 1986-87; Concordia University, B.A., 1985
Interests: Writing, yoga, volunteering in a palliative care unit



Awards:
Journey Prize for the best short story in Canada, 1991, for "The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios"; National Magazine Award for best short story, 1992, for "The Time I Heard the Private Donald J. Rankin String Concerto with One Discordant Violin, by the American Composer John Morton"; story selected for 1991-92 Pushcart Prize XVI Anthology, Best of the Small Presses; Air Canada Award, Canadian Authors Association, 1993, for "Bright Young New Thing"; short-listed, First Novel Award, Chapters/Books in Canada, 1997, for Self; short-listed, Governor General's Literary Award for fiction, 2001, Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction, 2001, and Booker Prize, 2002, all for *Life of Pi: A Novel*.

Past Works:
The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios and Other Stories, Knopf Canada (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 1993, Harcourt (New York, NY), 2004.
Self, Faber and Faber (London, England), 1996.
Life of Pi: A Novel, Knopf Canada (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 2001; Harcourt (New York, NY), 2001.

Works in Progress:
A novel about a donkey and a monkey traveling across a landscape that is actually a shirt worn during the Holocaust by a Jew.

Media Adaptations:
Fox Studios bought film rights to Martel's novel *Life of Pi* and assigned screenwriter Dean Gorgaris to the project.

Author: Yann Martel (2)

Sidelights:

Yann Martel, Canadian author of fiction, "is being hailed as a remarkable voice," wrote Rosemary Goring in the *Glasgow Herald,* "the harbinger of a fresh wave of literary invention from a nation already famous for its fiction." Following in the footsteps of Margaret Atwood, Robertson Davies, and Alice Munro, Martel has earned international repute for his fiction, in particular the award-winning 2001 title, *Life of Pi: A Novel*. Born in Spain to Canadian parents, Martel grew up and has lived all over the world, including Alaska, Costa Rica, France, Mexico, Iran, Turkey, India, and Canada. His father was a diplomat and poet from the province of Quebec, one-time winner of the Governor General's Award for poetry. Martel, who began to write after studying philosophy at college, once told CA: "I write because it's the only way I know how to create, and to create is to live."

Martel's short story, "The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios," first appeared in the *Malahat Review* and won the 1991 Journey Prize for the best Canadian short story. Two years later, Martel published that story along with three others as *The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios and Other Stories*, in a collection that dealt with the final hours of a condemned man, an AIDS patient's imaginary life, and the debut of an amazing and rather bizarre symphony. A reviewer for *Quill and Quire* felt that while the title story is a "good" tale, another of the stories collected in the book, "The Time I Heard the Private Donald J. Rankin String Concerto with One Discordant Violin, by the American Composer John Morton," is an even "better story, and one that more clearly says, This is something new." The same reviewer further compared Martel to writers such as Paul Theroux, Bruce Chatwin, Paul Auster, and Allan Gurganus. "Martel . . . writes in a way that makes a lot of other fiction look like, well, like fiction."

In 1996, Martel published his first novel, *Self,* the fictional autobiography of a young author and traveler who suddenly finds he has changed genders. The *Quill and Quire* reviewer praised the "candid, intelligent, likable, life-embracing, protean, chatty, smug, and mischievous" narrator of that work, which views the events of thirty years through a mirthful and perceptive prism. Similarly, a contributor to the *Toronto Globe and Mail* felt that Martel "wonderfully represents the child's universe in a seamless whole," calling his novel a "penetrating, funny, original and absolutely delightful exploration."

With his 2001 novel, *Life of Pi*, Martel continued his growth as a writer in a mixture of animal tall-tale and high-seas adventure that had critics comparing him to Joseph Conrad and Salman Rushdie. The narrator, Piscine Molitor Patel, known as Pi, is now a middle-aged man living in Canada. But as a youth, he lived in the Indian city of Pondicherry where his father ran the zoo. The young boy developed an encyclopedic knowledge of animal behavior, loved stories, and learned to practice three religions: Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. When he was sixteen, Pi's parents decided to immigrate to Canada, taking along part of the menagerie with them in a Japanese cargo ship. However, when the ship sank during a storm, there were only six survivors inhabiting a lone lifeboat on that vastness of the Pacific: Pi, a rat, a female orangutan, a zebra with a broken leg, a hyena, and a four-hundred-fifty pound Bengal tiger named Richard Parker.

Life of Pi is the recounting of the fight for survival that ensued, in which Martel, via Pi, takes the reader into the food-chain politics aboard the lifeboat. The hyena manages to devour the few flies that have been buzzing around the boat, but that does not quite stave off hunger. Thereafter the hyena makes a meal of the zebra and orangutan, in that order. The Bengal tiger then eats the hyena, and makes eyes at the young human cargo. To keep himself alive, Pi feeds the tiger the rat, but he recognizes that the only way he will be able to survive in the long term is by somehow living with the tiger. He trains Richard Parker, feeds, marks out separate territories on the boat with his urine, and comes to love the tiger. When they finally land in Mexico over two hundred days later, Pi is half blind, and the tiger runs off into the jungle. Because the authorities there do not believe Pi's fantastic tale, Pi tells a version with no animals involved, and suggests that they believe the better of the two stories.

Author: Yann Martel (3)

Sidelights: (Continued)

Martel's blending of fantasy and nautical lore in *Life of Pi* prompted a reviewer for the *Toronto Globe and Mail* to note that the "whole fantastic voyage carries hints of [Ernest Hemingway's] *Old Man and the Sea* and the magic realism of [Jorge] Amado and [Gabriel Garcia] Marquez and the absurdity of [Samuel] Beckett." "Ever aware of cliches, and using them to his advantage, *Pi* is Martel's triumph," the same reviewer further commented. "He is understated and ironic, utterly believable and pure." Similar words of praise greeted the book's English publication around the world. "If Canadian writer Yann Martel were a preacher, he'd be charismatic, funny and convert all the nonbelievers," wrote *Nation's* Charlotte Innes. Innes commented on the postmodernist elements of the story: "multiple narrators, a playful fairytale quality. . ., realistically presented events that may be hallucinations or simply made up," even the duplicate ending at the end of the novel and the symbolism of Pi's name, as "the irrational number with which scientists try to understand the universe." Thus the author presents his readers with a "sea of questions and confusion," yet Innes felt that Martel "makes one laugh so much, and at times feel so awed and chilled, that even thrashing around in bewilderment or disagreement one can't help but be captured by his prose." Book's Paul Evans called *Life of Pi* a "work of wonder," while *Booklist's* William Hickman called it a "strange, touching novel" that "frequently achieves something deeper than technical gimmickry." In a *Publishers Weekly* review a contributor described Martel's second novel as a "fabulous romp through an imagination by turns ecstatic, cunning, despairing, and resilient," and an "impressive achievement." The same reviewer felt that Martel "displays the clever voice and tremendous storytelling skills of an emerging master." *Los Angeles Times* reviewer Francie Lin appreciated the "lightness and humor that gives it the quality of a fairy tale," and *New York Times Book Review* contributor Gary Krist thought *Life of Pi* "could renew your faith in the ability of novelists to invest even the most outrageous scenario with plausible life."

Reception of the novel in Britain was equally positive. Novelist Margaret Atwood, writing in the *London Sunday Times,* commented, "It's fresh, original, smart, devious, and crammed with absorbing lore." Through this novel, Atwood noted, "[o]ur customary picture of life is torn apart and through the rent in the canvas we see the real world. And it's a world of wonders, and there are tigers in it." *London Times* reviewer Glyn Brown felt the story was "so magical, so playful, so harrowing and astonishing that it will make you believe imagination might be the first step [in believing in God]." Allan Massie, writing in the *Edinburgh Scotsman,* observed, "The story is engaging, Pi's resourcefulness both pleasing and amusing." Massie further noted, "What makes this novel so delightful is its light-heartedness." And for Justine Jordan, writing in the *London Guardian,* the novel was "not so much. . . an allegory or magical-realist fable, but. . .an edge-of-seat adventure." *New Internationalist* reviewer Peter Whittaker called it an "astonishingly original novel," and William Skidelsky in the *New Statesman* also praised the "compelling" storytelling.

For Jane Shilling, writing in the *London Sunday Telegraph,* however, the novel was "flawed" by what she found to be the unbalanced structure of the book, yet she still found it a "fascinating novel—though as with some jewels, the flaws are arguably part of the charm." Toby Clements also had reservations in the *London Daily Telegraph,* feeling that *Life of Pi* "never really comes alive in the emotional sense. It is more a novel of proposition and conjecture, a series of narrative questions and solutions." Yet Clements added, "Despite this, *Life of Pi* is a hilarious novel, full of clever tricks, amusing asides and grand originality."

Critical acclaim also met the Australian publication of *Life of Pi*, with Rebekah Scott noting in the *Brisbane Courier-Mail* that the novel is "strange, but it draws a gleaming confidence from its strangeness." Francesca Cann found Martel's to be an "involving narrative," in a *Melbourne Herald Sun* review, and Michelle de Krester, writing in the *Weekend Australian,* felt that "what is enchanting about this novel is not the sweep of its intellectual concerns but the intensity of its imagination. Martel is a natural."

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Author: Yann Martel (4)

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Independent Sunday (London, England), July 7, 2002, Robin Buss, "Adrift on the Open Sea, with Only a Tiger for Company," review of *Life of Pi*, p. 14.
Kirkus Reviews, May 1, 2002, review of *Life of Pi*, p. 613.
Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service, June 5, 2002, Charles Matthews, review of *Life of Pi*, p. K146.
Library Journal, June 15, 2002, Edward Come, review of *Life of Pi*, p. 95.
Los Angeles Times, June 16, 2002, Francie Lin, "Floating on Faith," review of *Life of Pi*, p. BR7.
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New Internationalist, August, 2002, Peter Whittaker, review of *Life of Pi*, p. 33.
New Statesman, July 29, 2002, William Skidelsky, "Novel Thoughts," p. 39.
New Yorker, August 5, 2002, review of *Life of Pi*, p. 77.
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Observer (London, England), May 23, 1993, review of *The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios and Other Stories*, p. 71; May 26, 2002, Tim Adams, review of *Life of Pi*, p. 15.
Publishers Weekly, April 8, 2002, review of *Life of Pi*, p. 200.
Quill and Quire, April, 1993, review of *The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios and Other Stories*, p. 22; April, 1996, review of *Self,* pp. 1, 28; August, 2001, review of *Life of Pi*, p. 22.
San Francisco Chronicle, September 25, 2002, "Six Finalists for Man Booker Prize," p. D2.
Scotland on Sunday (Edinburgh, Scotland), May 12, 2002, Michel Faber, review of *Life of Pi*, p. 5; August 4, 2002, Jackie McGlone, "*Life of Pi*: Animal, Vegetable, or Mineral?," p. 9; September 29, 2002, Alex Massie, "Byng's Formula Means Knowing the Value of Pi," p. 5.
Scotsman (Edinburgh, Scotland), May 11, 2002, Allan Massie, review of *Life of Pi*, p. 9.
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Author: Yann Martel (5)

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Times Educational Supplement, December 13, 1996, review of *Self,* p. 33.
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Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on:
Life of Pi

Discussion Questions from One Book AZ:

http://onebookaz.org/2004/index-1.html

1. There is a lot of storytelling in this religious novel. Is there a relationship between religion and storytelling? Is religion a form of storytelling?

2. Pi defends zoos. Are you convinced? Is a zoo a good place for a wild animal?

3. Pi believes passionately that animals kept in good conditions in a zoo are no worse off than those in the wild. Do you agree?

4. In chapter 23, Pi sparks a lively debate when all three of his spiritual advisors try to claim him. At the heart of this confrontation is Pi's insistence that he cannot accept an exclusively Hindu, Christian, or Muslim faith; he can only be content with all three. What is Pi seeking that can solely be attained by this apparent contradiction.

5. How do the human beings in your world reflect the animal behavior observed by Pi? What do Pi's strategies for dealing with Richard Parker teach us about confronting the fearsome creatures in our lives?

6. Pi's knowledge of zoology and animal is important for his ultimate survival. Discuss how he uses the alpha and beta animal roles for his benefit.

7. In his interview with the disbelieving shipping officials Pi is forced to tell a more credible account. He asks the officials which story they prefer, "since it makes no factual difference to you and you can't prove the questions either way, which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?"

8. One reviewer said the novel contains hints of The *Old Man and the Sea,* and Pi himself measures his experience in relation to history's most famous castaways. Considering that Pi's shipwreck is the first to focus on a boy and his tiger, how does *Life of Pi* compare to other to other maritime novels and films?

9. Initially *Life of Pi* is a wrenching shipwreck survival story. Pi utilizes the survival items he finds on the boat. He also employs his knowledge of animal behavior learned at the knee of his father, the zookeeper. The story of survival is far-fetched to begin with but with each of Pi's careful explanations the possibility of survival becomes more plausible, particularly because we know from the beginning that Pi is alive and safe living in Canada. At what point did you begin to question the credibility of the story? What were the clues? Did the final twist come as a surprise? Is it important that fiction is believable and realistic? Or can fiction be purely imaginative and still have significant impact?

Book: Life of Pi

Discussion Questions: (Continued)

10. Many of the names used in the story have double significance. Pi entertains us with a detailed explanation of how he came to be named for a French swimming pool, the Piscine Molitor. He describes how his classmates tormented him with a particular mispronunciation of his name and how he shortened it to Pi. The anecdote about his name is humorous and whimsical and yet the Greek letter pi stands for a mathematical fraction that is used to bring order to and explain something that is unexplainable. What is the significance of Pi's name? What does Pi himself say about names near the beginning of the novel? Does Pi live up to the promise contained in the meaning of his name?

11. Richard Parker is another interesting name. For a zoo animal, and a tiger no less, to be called by such ordinary human name is absurdly comical. Pi explains this was due to a clerical error when the tiger arrived at the zoo. Richard Parker also is a reference to a historical survival story. The yacht Mignonette that sunk on its way to Australia in the 1870s had four people that survived on a lifeboat—the captain, two mates and the cabin boy called Richard Parker. The three ultimate survivors sliced up poor Richard Parker and ate him. They were later tried and found guilty for murder, a legal precedent for cases involving survival and self defense. (Read more about the reference to Richard Parker on http://www.canongate.net)

Why the reference to Richard Parker in *Life of Pi*?

Discuss what is acceptable for survival in extreme circumstances.

12. The charm of a good story is what reels the reader into *Life of Pi*. But the real judge of an author's storytelling talent is whether or not the author handles particularly wrenching subject matter with some element of humor. Where did the author use humor in this story? How did his use of humor set the overall tone of the story and of Pi's character? Did it make the story more or less believable?

13. The layers of this story peel back like the skins of an onion. Pi's fascination with religions is at once provocative and confusing. By the end of the book, the reader realizes the story is much more than "survival shipwreck story." Is the author drawing a parallel between zoos and religion? If so, what is the connection? What does Pi say about our "illusions" about freedom? How did Pi use zoos and religion to illustrate his points?

14. The story is about opposites: the rational as opposed to the picturesque; the skeptical and the faithful; fact and fantasy. Is Pi giving us the "facts" of his story? Or is he giving us the "meaning" of what happened in his story? Is the story the "truth" or is he aiming for the "deeper truths" within the meaning of the story? Is his story so irrational when our lives abound with things that are irrational and unexplainable? If we cannot rationally explain things like "love" or "happiness" or "fear" or "faith," can we categorically dismiss Pi's tale of survival on the basis that it is irrational?

Book: Life of Pi

NoveList Book Discussion Guide:

Yann Martel was born in Spain in 1963. His parents served as diplomats and traveled the world, with Martel growing up in such places as Alaska, Costa Rica, France, and Mexico. In addition to his work as a diplomat, Martel's father was also a poet and writer whose work helped launch Yann into his own career writing novels.

Martell eventually attended Trent University, where he studied philosophy and began to write. By age 27 he had taken up writing as his full-time job, earning his living from it and traveling when able. He has spent time in Iran, Turkey, Ecuador, Peru, and India, including a six month stint in southern India while doing research for the novel that would become *Life of Pi*.

His writing includes a collection of short stories, *The Facts Behind Helsinki Roccamatios and Other Stories,* as well as a novel called *Self,* neither of which created any critical or popular interest and which Martel himself has described as "bad".

It was in preparing for a new novel to follow *Self* that Martel traveled to India, but he found that his new project simply fizzled out and it was there that he remembered an intriguing premise he had once come across in the review of a book by the Brazilian writer Moacyr Scliar: a small boy trapped in a lifeboat with a black panther. The idea felt so right for a book that Martel abandoned his previous project and spent the next months interviewing zookeepers and animal experts in Southern India and in reading survival stories and religious texts. The result was his second novel, *Life of Pi*, which appeared in 2001 and became a runaway bestseller of a novel. The book managed to win the Booker Prize and then became entangled in a debate over inspiration and plagiarism [http://books.guardian.co.uk/bookerprize2002/story/0,12350,836092,00.html] that only helped to turn Martel into a literary celebrity.

He currently lives in Berlin, where his parents reside, both of whom are now literary translators and are currently translating *Life of Pi* into French.

Summary:

Piscine Molitor Patel, the son of an Indian zookeeper in Pondicherry, narrates the strange story of his life to the novel's narrator. Now living in Canada, he begins his narrative back in India when as a child he developed his peculiar religious convictions—peculiar because Piscine ("Pi" as he becomes known) decides to embrace Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam at the same time. His frustrated parents don't know what to make of Pi's unorthodox devotion to three religions, but Pi himself sees no contradiction between his sets of beliefs.

When the family zoo falls on hard times, Pi's father decides to move the family to Canada in search of a new life. They travel on a Japanese cargo ship, along with many of their animals, and begin the long journey across the Pacific. The ship does not make it far beyond the Philippines, though, before encountering a strong storm. In mysterious circumstances the animals are released from their cages and the ship ruptures and begins to founder. Pi scrambles for safety, but when the confusion fades, he finds himself alone in a life raft with a zebra, a hyena, an orangutan, and Richard Parker—a full-grown male Bengal tiger.

Pi's narrative of his life now takes on the familiar outlines of the "lost at sea" story, except for the presence of the animals on the raft and Pi's own interest in discussing faith and God and his philosophy of life while attempting to fend off dehydration and a tiger. In fairly short order all the animals except Richard Parker are dead and life on the raft settles into uneasy co-existence between Pi and the tiger. They enter a daily rhythm of subsistence, searching for fish and water, sleeping during the heat of the day, letting the raft drift along with the ocean currents. Richard Parker, a constant source of terror, becomes also the only companion Pi has for many months, and the animal ferocity of the tiger inspires Pi with a desire to live even as he faces despair at being rescued.

NoveList Book Discussion Guide: (Continued)

Pi's narrative grows increasingly fantastic as it progresses, reaching at last a point of pure fantasy. The last bit that he narrates is of his washing ashore on a Mexican beach and of Richard Parker's disappearance into the wilderness. The narrator takes over the story again at this point, inserting the results of his own research into what really happened on Pi's journey, casting doubt on everything Pi has narrated about his fantastic journey, but in such a way that the trip takes on a new horror and beauty and power—and says even more about Pi's favorite theme, the love of God.

Questions:

While answers are provided, there is no presumption that you have been given the last word. Readers bring their own personalities to the books that they are examining. What is obvious and compelling to one reader may be invisible to the next. The questions that have been selected provide one reasonable access to the text; the answers are intended to give you examples of what a reflective reader might think. The variety of possible answers is one of the reasons we find book discussions such a rewarding activity.

Why does it matter that the story opens in Pondicherry, India?

The narrator tells us a few facts about Pondicherry in his "Author's Note" without making a big deal of them. "In population and size it is an inconsequent part of India—by comparison, Prince Edward Island is a giant within Canada," he tells us, and it was "once the capital of that most modest of colonial empires, French India." The French, never able to hold much territory on the subcontinent, nevertheless clung to their port of Pondicherry for almost three hundred years, leaving only in 1954. They left behind "nice white buildings, broad streets at right angles to each other, street names such as rue de la Marine and rue Saint-Louis, and kepis, caps, for the policemen" (p. ix-x).

Pondicherry is an anomaly in India, a tiny outpost surrounded by the rest of the country that presses in around it, though it manages to preserve self-rule. Much like Pi himself, the city is distinct, idiosyncratic, a standout anomaly. It's peculiarly appropriate that Pi should grow up in such a place and that he should come to adopt such a strange and paradoxical set of religious beliefs.

As Pi says of the town, and specifically of his father's zoo, "to me, it was paradise on earth" (p. 14). It is a limited place, but one that Pi comes to love greatly, and it only after he is forced to leave this earthly paradise that his troubles begin and he is forced to confront the question of whether he believes all the things he learned in his childhood. It is only after leaving Pondicherry and spending almost a year aboard a life boat that Pi discovers the true depth of his faith in God and lives out a story that, as his friend Mr. Adirubasamy says, "will make you believe in God" (p. x).

What does the zoo of Pi's childhood teach him about animals and humans?

Though the book's story is ostensibly about the shipwreck and raft journey that Pi makes, over one hundred pages of the tale are first devoted to Pi's early life and upbringing in Pondicherry. His father, a zookeeper, forces his children to learn much about animals and to respect their wildness and sheer power. The lessons Pi learns here are valuable, even necessary, to his shipwreck experience, but they extend beyond simple survival training.

NoveList Book Discussion Guide: (Continued)

After reading the novel's concluding section, we're forced to reconsider all that came before and to read the presence of animals in the story in a different way. Some of the clues as to how we ought to do this are present in the opening parts of the story, as Pi's lessons about animals turn out to have sharp relevance to his own beliefs about life, God, and storytelling.

In looking around at his father's zoo, Pi reflects on the fact that zoos have fallen into disfavor in parts of the world. "I know zoos are no longer in people's good graces. Religion faces the same problem. Certain illusions about freedom plague them both" (p. 19). He makes the explicit connection here between the zoo and religion, arguing that both have lost favor because people have come to see them as means of domination and control.

Pi wants to reverse this way of thinking. He argues that a good zoo can be as comfortable to an animal as a house may be for a person (p. 18), and that animals can be most free, can be most themselves, when they aren't as worried about finding food or avoiding predators. The confining nature of the zoo can actually free the animals up to be more at peace. It does this not by duplicating the conditions of the wild, but of providing the basic elements an animal requires. "It is not so much a question of constructing an imitation of conditions in the wild as of getting to the essence of these conditions," Pi says (p. 40).

These are the same qualities that religion comes to play in Pi's own life: the restrictions and disciplines and doctrines that surround the believer can be the very structures that provide comfort. The idea that unlimited options and utter autonomy of action is the truest kind of freedom is one of the "illusions" that Pi speaks of when he talks about religion. "I have heard nearly as much nonsense about zoos as I have about God and religion," he says. "Well-meaning but misinformed peopled think animals in the wild are 'happy' because they are 'free'" (p. 15).

People who don't respect any religion may come to view all religion as a limitation on freedom, but Pi uses his own early knowledge of animals and zoos to argue that a greater freedom may exist where the essentials of life are truly provided for. In his case, those are found within three religions at once.

What is the significance of Pi's name?

Pi's curious name is more than simply interesting—it illustrates in miniature one of the novel's central themes, that of rational explanation versus non-rational faith claims. Pi's given name is Piscine, and he opens his story by explaining the picturesque origins of his name. He was named, he tells us, after a swimming pool that his father's friend Francis Adirubasamy loved dearly, the Piscine Molitor in Paris. Everything about the anecdote is charming, quirky, and faintly ridiculous. It's a name that symbolizes the picturesque approach to life.

Significantly, the name is shortened only once Pi enters school, where such a unique name has trouble being fitted into the "system." Teachers routinely mispronounce it and Pi's classmates prove even worse, mocking him cruelly, until at last he shortens his name to Pi out of desperation to avoid further humiliation. Pi, the Greek letter that has come to stand for a mathematical fraction used in geometry, a discipline with order, precision, and elegance—but little of the picturesque.

Does all this matter? Consider what Pi himself says on the issue of names near the beginning of the novel. "It is true that those we meet can change us, sometimes so profoundly that we are not the same afterwards, even unto our names. Witness Simon who is called Peter, Matthew also known as Levi, Nathaniel who is also Bartholomew, Judas, not Iscariot, who took the name Thaddeus, Simeon who went by Niger, Saul who became Paul" (p. 20).

NoveList Book Discussion Guide: (Continued)

Names are powerful things, but in Pi's case, the mathematical promise of his name is never fulfilled. Though he listens constantly to teachers such as Mr. Kumar who espouse a purely scientific and materialistic view of life, Pi moves to the other extreme. He embraces not one, but three religions, to the consternation of his parents. And the story that he narrates about his time in the life raft, that improbable, impossible, but beautiful tale—it is as though Pi is reclaiming through that story his own true birthright as Piscine Molitor. His story contains the same elements of individual quirkiness and beauty that brought his own name into being, and raises the same question as his name once did: which approach to life is better? Which approach is truer?

What lessons about faith does Pi adopt from his three religious traditions?

Rather than concerning himself with reconciling Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, Pi embraces them in a way that emphasizes the "faith" each one requires of its adherents. Whether this is a tenable system is another question, but it does allow Pi to explore the question of "faith" in general without descending into the specific doctrines of various religions. His conclusions about faith are shaped by his differing worship experiences, but also by the time spent on the raft. His conclusion? Faith takes real work; it isn't something that simply happens on its own.

Pi grows up surrounded by skeptics and doubters in Pondicherry, among them his teacher Mr. Kumar, who routinely tells him, "There are no grounds for going beyond a scientific explanation of reality and no sound reason for believing anything but our sense experience. A clear intellect, close attention to detail and a little scientific knowledge will expose religion as superstitious bosh. God does not exist" (p. 27). But despite his own growing religious awareness, Pi doesn't find atheists like Mr. Kumar to be the real enemies of faith. They have done the intellectual and emotional work of coming to a philosophy of life that they can embrace and live through.

The true enemy of faith is those who do little work, who neither doubt nor believe. "It is not atheists who get stuck in my craw, but agnostics," says Pi. "Doubt is useful for a while. We must all pass through the garden of Gethsemane. ... But we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation" (p. 28). This agnostic attitude, one that believes that no choices are necessary or that they may be endlessly deferred, most frustrates Pi.

Faith is not the sort of thing that one will simply stumble across, but something that must be sought. Ultimately, people may decide that it cannot be found, but the looking is an act that Pi believes each individual must engage in. The narrator of the book makes the same point as he describes a visit to Pi's home. He says, finally paying attention to the house for the first time, "This house is more than a box full of icons. They were there all along, but I hadn't seen them because I wasn't looking for them" (p. 80). As Pi tells the Japanese investigators at the story's end, "And so it goes with God" (p. 317). One has to look, has to look consciously and with real attention, before faith in God can even be a possibility. Those who remain content in their half-doubt will never see.

In a way, Pi's story makes the claim that one has to believe first in order to come to fuller belief. If one is already sure that God does not exist, one won't look for signs of his presence. As Saint Augustine once said, "Faith seeks understanding," not vice versa, and Pi illustrates the openness of spirit towards the possible wonders of life that can at last find a solid faith of its own.

What does Richard Parker teach Pi?

NoveList Book Discussion Guide: (Continued)

Richard Parker is a constant source of fear to Pi, who comes to realize how deeply fear is opposed to life. "I must say a word about fear," he says. "It is life's only true opponent. Only fear can defeat life. It is a clever, treacherous adversary, how well I know. It has no decency, respects no law or convention, shows no mercy. It goes for your weakest spot, which it finds with unerring ease" (p. 161).

Pi's greatest mental achievement is the discovery of how to overcome this numbing fear—name it for what it is. "You must fight hard to shine the light of words upon it. Because if you don't, if your fear becomes a wordless darkness that you avoid, perhaps even manage to forget, you open yourself to further attacks of fear because you never truly fought the opponent who defeated you" (p. 162). Only then can you begin to face up to the fear, to do battle with it.

Fear tells Pi that certain things—like being mauled by a Bengal tiger—cannot be handled. It says that pain and terror will be "too much" for him. But Pi discovers that the whispers of fear are only lies. When he is hit across the face and blinded for the moment, his fear tells him that Richard Parker has at last decided to finish him off. Pi imagines the approach of his own death. "I was to have my face clawed off—this was the gruesome way I was to die. The pain was so severe I felt nothing. Blessed be shock. Blessed be that part of us that protects us from too much pain and sorrow. At the heart of life is a fuse box" (p. 180). But in the moment of his greatest fear, Pi learns that the body has hidden systems and resources he had not suspected, ways of keeping him alive and ways of dealing with pain. He also learns, when at last he opens his eyes, that what had struck him was not Richard Parker after all, but a flying fish.

Tasting his greatest fear and finding it to be bearable, Pi comes at last to learn a kind of peace from the very animal who so terrified him earlier. "It was Richard Parker who calmed me down. It is the irony of this story that the one who scared me witless to start with was the very same who brought me peace, purpose, I dare say even wholeness" (p. 162). Richard Parker becomes his ward, his charge—Pi feeds him and trains him and the two become, in a way, companions on the journey.

Why does the episode with the algae island and the meerkats border on the unbelievable?

Pi's journey across the Pacific often has a magical and dreamlike quality about it, but in its first stages it retains an internal credibility. Once we have accepted the Bengal tiger and the Indian boy in the lifeboat, their journey unfolds as a typical survival story—for a while. The longer the journey progresses, the stranger it becomes. The episode with the blind Frenchman begins to make readers question whether Pi is slipping into hallucinations or whether he is manufacturing the entire tale. And then, at the moment that the episode with the Frenchman ends, Pi tells us, "I made an exceptional botanical discovery. But there will be many who disbelieve the following episode" (p. 256).

His time among the meerkats on the island of algae becomes so incredible that it is difficult to believe at all, even with all the odd events that he has experienced on the voyage so far. The island is not such a strange place that it could not exist, but it makes a supremely unlikely tale, one that requires a great deal of faith to believe. And this is precisely the point. As Pi's journey lasts longer and longer, it grows increasingly fantastic and forces the reader at last to decide whether or not to accept the narrative or to reject everything that has been read so far. It is with the algae island that credulity is pushed to the point where a choice must be made, and it is the same choice that Pi struggles with throughout his journey: to believe in a God that he cannot see as he floats alone through the ocean or to give up his faith altogether.

NoveList Book Discussion Guide: (Continued)

The episode on the island also shows Pi how deeply evil and suffering are woven into the fabric of life. This most idyllic of locations, with plenty of food and water and gentle inhabitants, is actually a deathtrap, a seething island of acid and poison. With the discovery (by unraveling a "fruit") that the island had already killed another human, Pi finally pushes off from this dangerous Eden that cannot sustain him. In having his hopes of salvation dashed so bitterly by his new knowledge, Pi sinks into his lowest depression. But it is in this low point, "in the throes of unremitting suffering," that he turns again to God (p. 284).

"When we reached land" are his next words, a testament to the sustaining power of faith and of God's provision. Pi's own resources are stretched to their limits before he collapses at last into a total trust in God's providential care, and the way he arranges his narrative forces readers to make a similar choice. With their credulity strained to the breaking point and a more "rational" narrative of the journey available at the novel's end, readers must decide whether or not to make their own leap of faith and embrace Pi's original story about his journey.

What should we make of the novel's conclusion?

Pi's story ends with the narrator's introducing himself once again, telling us how he tracked down the Japanese investigators of the shipwreck and discovered the strange end to Pi's tale. After his arrival on a Mexican beach, Pi ends up in an infirmary, where the two investigators arrive to question him about the wreck and find that Pi's strange story—the story we have just been reading—strains their credulity to the breaking point. When Pi finishes his narrative, one of the men says directly,

"I'm sorry to say it so bluntly, we don't mean to hurt your feelings, but you don't really expect us to believe you, do you? Carnivorous trees? A fish-eating algae that produces fresh water? Tree-dwelling aquatic rodents? These things don't exist." "Only because you've never seen them." "That's right. We believe what we see." (p. 294).

Pi's entire narrative thus becomes one more example of the opposed views of life found in the book, the rational and the picturesque, the skeptical and the faithful. He challenges the two Japanese investigators to believe his tale, throwing its impossibility in their faces, then pointing out how impossible most things in life—even life itself—sounds. "Love is hard to believe, ask any lover. Life is hard to believe, ask any scientist. God is hard to believe, ask any believer. What is your problem with hard to believe?" (p. 297).

Pi drives home the point to that humans already believe many difficult, non-intuitive, extraordinary things. Clearly, belief in a story cannot simply be a matter of that story's making sense. He goes on to argue that the investigators don't simply want a story that's easier to believe, but they want a story that will not challenge their view of the world. They want a story that fits within the schema they have already established. "I know what you want," Pi tells them. "You want a story that won't surprise you. That will confirm what you already know. That won't make you see higher or further or differently. You want a flat story. An immobile story. You want a dry, yeastless factuality" (p. 302).

And then he offers up a different tale, one that explains all the same events, but this one filled with humans instead of animals, and far more terrible deeds. He then quizzes the investigators,

"So tell me, since it makes no factual difference to you and you can't prove the question either way, which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?" Mr. Okamoto: "That's an interesting questions..." Mr. Chiba: "The story with animals." Mr. Okamoto: "Yes. The story with animals is the better story." Pi Patel: "Thank you. And so it goes with God" (p. 317).

NoveList Book Discussion Guide: (Continued)

Pi never does tell us which story was the "factual" one, though we may well have a good idea. He's more concerned instead with getting his interrogators to see that his fantastic narrative is, in the ways that truly matter, the "truer" story. Yes, it is improbable, but it's also far more beautiful that the "realistic" version of the story, and it tells us more about faith and God and the wonder of being alive. That it is also astonishingly difficult to believe is almost beside the point, for God and the world are both difficult to believe in as well. Pi wants to open the men up to the possibility of seeing the world in a different way, one apart from the facts and ugliness and boredom of normal life. They want the facts, but Pi wants to give them the meaning of what happened.

Why is it significant that the novel contains exactly 100 chapters?

Pi comments to the narrator, near the end of his strange tale, that he believes in the "harmony of order," then goes on to say, "Where we can, we must give things a meaningful shape. For example—I wonder—could you tell my jumbled story in exactly one hundred chapters, not one more, not one less? I'll tell you, that's one thing I hate about my nickname, the way that number runs on forever. It's important in life to conclude things properly. Only then can you let go" (p. 285).

What is most interesting about this comment is that it is so at odds with the story Pi has just told. His tale has no neat conclusions, no well-crafted goodbyes. In fact, the two partings that mean the most to him take place without Pi's even speaking a word. His family vanishes in the wreckage of the ship without a chance to speak to one another. Richard Parker, symbolic of the natural world and its cruelly beautiful ways, leaps over Pi's head and onto the Mexican beach, never looking back and showing no affection for the boy with whom he has shared a raft for all that time.

Pi's interest in telling his tale seems, in part, an attempt to provide order and structure to an unstructured, chaotic tragedy, to give it form and meaning. And this is precisely what the narrator wonders about in the "Author's note" at the novel's beginning. He asks, "That's what fiction is about, isn't it, the selective transforming of reality? The twisting of it to bring out its essence?" (p. viii). These comments go to the very heart of story-telling, they ask about its purpose and utility. They are the same issues Pi raises with the shipping investigators, though they seem not to understand.

Pi's story, in the hands of the narrator, does come out exactly at 100 chapters, a nice round number that rarely occurs in the messiness of reality. It's a concrete example of Pi's own powerful belief that order exists in the universe but that it must be sought out before we will see it. The goal of storytelling, both for Pi and the narrator, is not to narrate real events in chronological order but to get at the deeper truths beneath a story's events. That a story can change the way people view reality is illustrated in the novel's final line, where the report of the shipping investigators concludes, "Very few castaways can claim to have survived so long at sea as Mr. Patel, and none in the company of an adult Bengal tiger" (p. 319).

NoveList Book Discussion Guide: (Continued)

Further Reading:

Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)

The classic story of shipwreck and survival, Defoe's novel describes a castaway stranded for years on an island, using his wits and his faith to survive. When he discovers another human footprint on the island, though, the existence that he has carved out for himself begins to unravel.

C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (1944)

The middle story in Lewis' "space trilogy" will make more sense if read following *Out of the Silent Planet,* but the similarities to Pi's interlude on the floating island of algae are striking. Lewis' theological investigations through fiction also have strong echoes in *Life of Pi*.

William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (1954)

Pi believes that the limits found in religion allow people to be truly free. Golding's novel explores a situation in which all limits are removed from a group of British schoolboys shipwrecked on a small island and forced to survive there for some time without adults. The result is a chilling study of human evil and the potential for depravity within each person.

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1851)

A classic of American letters. This is the story of Captain Ahab and his ferocious quest to find and kill Moby Dick, the white whale, at any cost. Although in some ways an adventure story, the novel is more concerned about larger questions of life and death as Ahab hunts a creature who comes to represent everything mysterious and inscrutable about the universe.

Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995)

Rushdie's narrator describes his life and the life of India as it progresses over the last fifty years, tracing its independence, its political struggles, its business dealing, and its religious conflicts, all of which the narrator and his family have some hand in. This is a very different India from Pi's Pondicherry, one that is more violent and fierce and chaotic, but equally fascinating.

October, 2003

This Book Discussion Guide was developed by Nathan Anderson, a novelist living in Wheaton, IL.

Book: Life of Pi

Reading Group Guide

About This Book:

Winner of the 2002 Man Booker Prize for Fiction

Pi Patel is an unusual boy. The son of a zookeeper, he has an encyclopedic knowledge of animal behavior, a fervent love of stories, and practices not only his native Hinduism, but also Christianity and Islam. When Pi is sixteen, his family emigrates from India to North America aboard a Japanese cargo ship, along with their zoo animals bound for new homes.

The ship sinks. Pi finds himself alone in a lifeboat, his only companions a hyena, an orangutan, a wounded zebra, and Richard Parker, a 450-pound Bengal tiger. Soon the tiger has dispatched all but Pi, whose fear, knowledge, and cunning allow him to coexist with Richard Parker for 227 days lost at sea. When they finally reach the coast of Mexico, Richard Parker flees to the jungle, never to be seen again. The Japanese authorities who interrogate Pi refuse to believe his story and press him to tell them "the truth." After hours of coercion, Pi tells a second story, a story much less fantastical, much more conventional-but is it more true?

Life of Pi is at once a realistic, rousing adventure and a meta-tale of survival that explores the redemptive power of storytelling and the transformative nature of fiction. It's a story, as one character puts it, to make you believe in God.

Discussion Questions:

God, survival, and tiger behavior. It's hard to imagine a more invigorating combination of discussion topics. We hope that the following questions will enrich your reading of Pi's fantastic journey. After all, Pi didn't have to make his voyage alone; neither should you. May this guide serve as a pleasant companion..

1. In his introductory note Yann Martel says, "This book was born as I was hungry." What sort of emotional nourishment might *Life of Pi* have fed to its author?

2. Pondicherry is described as an anomaly, the former capital of what was once French India. In terms of storytelling, what makes this town a appropriate choice for Pi's upbringing?

3. Yann Martel recalls that many Pondicherry residents provided him with stories, but he was most intrigued by this tale because Mr. Adirubasamy said it would make him believe in God. Did Pi's tale alter your beliefs about God?

4. Early in the novel, we discover that the narrator majored in religious studies and zoology, with particular interests in a sixteenth-century Kabbalist and the admirable three-toed sloth. In subsequent chapters, he explains the ways in which religions and zoos are both steeped in illusion. Discuss some of the other ways in which these two fields find unlikely compatibility.

5. Yann Martel sprinkles the novel with italicized memories of the "real" Pi Patel and wonders in his author's note whether fiction is "the selective transforming of reality, the twisting of it to bring out its essence." If this is so, what is the essence of Pi?

Reading Group Guide: (Continued)

6. Pi's full name, Piscine Molitor Patel, was inspired by a Parisian swimming pool that "the gods would have delighted to swim in." The shortened form refers to the ratio of a circle's circumference divided by its diameter. Explore the significance of Pi's unusual name.

7. One reviewer said the novel contains hints of *The Old Man and the Sea,* and Pi himself measures his experience in relation to history's most famous castaways. Considering that Pi's shipwreck is the first to focus on a boy and his tiger, how does *Life of Pi* compares to other maritime novels and films?

8. How might the novel's flavor have been changed if Pi's sole surviving animal were the zebra or Orange Juice? (We assume that if the hyena had been the only surviving animal, Pi would not have lived to tell us his story.)

9. In chapter 23, Pi sparks a lively debate when all three of his spiritual advisors try to claim him. At the heart of this confrontation is Pi's insistence that he cannot accept an exclusively Hindu, Christian, or Muslim faith; he can only be content with all three. What is Pi seeking that can solely be attained by this apparent contradiction?

10. What do you make of Pi's assertion at the beginning of chapter 16 that we are all "in limbo, without religion, until some figure introduces us to God"? Do you believe that Pi's piousness was a response to his father's atheism?

11. Among Yann Martel's gifts is a rich descriptive palette. Regarding religion, he observes the green elements that represent Islam and the orange tones of Hinduism. What color would Christianity be, according to Pi's perspective?

12. How do the human beings in your world reflect the animal behavior observed by Pi? What do Pi's strategies for dealing with Richard Parker teach us about confronting the fearsome creatures in our lives?

13. Besides the loss of his family and possessions, what else did Pi lose when the Tsimtsum sank? What did he gain?

14. Nearly everyone experiences a turning point that represents the transition from youth to adulthood, albeit seldom as traumatic as Pi's. What event marks your coming of age?

15. How do Mr. Patel's zookeeping abilities compare to his parenting skills? Discuss the scene in which his tries to teach his children a lesson in survival by arranging for them to watch a tiger devour a goat. Did this in any way prepare Pi for the most dangerous experience of his life?

16. Why did Pi at first try so hard to save Richard Parker?

17. Pi imagines that his brother would have teasingly called him Noah. How does Pi's voyage compare to the biblical story of Noah, who was spared from the flood while God washed away the sinners?

18. Is *Life of Pi* a tragedy, romance, or comedy?

19. Do you agree with Pi's opinion that a zoo is more like a suburb than a jail?

20. How did you react to Pi's interview by the Japanese transport ministers? Did you ever believe that Pi's mother, along with a sailor and a cannibalistic cook, had perhaps been in the lifeboat with him instead of the animals? How does Yann Martel achieve such believability in his surprising plots?

Reading Group Guide: (Continued)

21. The opening scene occurs after Pi's ordeal has ended. Discussing his work in the first chapter, Pi says that a necktie is a noose, and he mentions some of the things that he misses about India (in spite of his love for Canada). Would you say that this novel has a happy ending? How does the grown-up version of Pi contrast with his little-boy scenes?

Reviews:

Booklist Review: Pi Patel, a young man from India, tells how he was shipwrecked and stranded in a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger for 227 days. This outlandish story is only the core of a deceptively complex three-part novel about, ultimately, memory as a narrative and about how we choose truths. Unlike other authors who use shifting chronologies and unreliable narrators, Martel frequently achieves something deeper than technical gimmickry. Pi, regardless of what actually happened to him, earns our trust as a narrator and a character, and makes good, in his way, on the promise in the last sentence of part one—that is, just before the tiger saga—"This story has a happy ending." If Martel's strange, touching novel seems a fable without quite a moral, or a parable without quite a metaphor, it still succeeds on its own terms. Oh, the promise in the entertaining "Author's Note" that this is a "story that will make you believe in God" is perhaps excessive, but there is much in it that verifies Martel's talent and humanist vision.

(Reviewed May 15, 2002) — Will Hickman

Publishers Weekly Review: /* Starred Review */ A fabulous romp through an imagination by turns ecstatic, cunning, despairing and resilient, this novel is an impressive achievement—"a story that will make you believe in God," as one character says. The peripatetic Pi (né the much-taunted Piscine) Patel spends a beguiling boyhood in Pondicherry, India, as the son of a zookeeper. Growing up beside the wild beasts, Pi gathers an encyclopedic knowledge of the animal world. His curious mind also makes the leap from his native Hinduism to Christianity and Islam, all three of which he practices with joyous abandon. In his 16th year, Pi sets sail with his family and some of their menagerie to start a new life in Canada. Halfway to Midway Island, the ship sinks into the Pacific, leaving Pi stranded on a life raft with a hyena, an orangutan, an injured zebra and a 450-pound Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. After the beast dispatches the others, Pi is left to survive for 227 days with his large feline companion on the 26-foot-long raft, using all his knowledge, wits and faith to keep himself alive. The scenes flow together effortlessly, and the sharp observations of the young narrator keep the tale brisk and engaging. Martel's potentially unbelievable plot line soon demolishes the reader's defenses, cleverly set up by events of young Pi's life that almost naturally lead to his biggest ordeal. This richly patterned work, Martel's second novel, won Canada's 2001 Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction. In it, Martel displays the clever voice and tremendous storytelling skills of an emerging master. (June)

-Staff (Reviewed April 8, 2002) (*Publishers Weekly,* vol 249, issue 14, p200)

Library Journal Review: /* Starred Review */ Named for a swimming pool in Paris—the Piscine Molitor—"Pi" Patel begins this extraordinary tale as a teenager in India, where his father is a zoo keeper. Deciding to immigrate to Canada, his father sells off most of the zoo animals, electing to bring a few along with the family on their voyage to their new home. But after only a few days out at sea, their rickety vessel encounters a storm. After crew members toss Pi overboard into one of the lifeboats, the ship capsizes. Not long after, to his horror, Pi is joined by Richard Parker, an acquaintance who manages to hoist himself onto the lifeboat from the roiling sea. You would think anyone in Pi's dire straits would welcome the company, but Richard Parker happens to be a 450-pound Bengal tiger. It is hard to imagine a fate more desperate than Pi's: "I was alone and orphaned, in the middle of the Pacific, hanging on to an oar, an adult tiger in front of me, sharks beneath me, a storm raging about me." At first Pi plots to kill Richard Parker. Then he becomes convinced that the tiger's survival is absolutely essential to

Book: *Life of Pi*

Reviews: (Continued)

his own. In this harrowing yet inspiring tale, Martel demonstrates skills so well honed that the story appears to tell itself without drawing attention to the writing. This second novel by the Spanish-born, award-winning author of Self, who now lives in Canada, is highly recommended for all fiction as well as animal and adventure collections.

— Edward Cone, New York (Reviewed June 15, 2002) (Library Journal, vol 127, issue 11, p95)

Kirkus Reviews: A fable about the consolatory and strengthening powers of religion flounders about somewhere inside this unconventional coming-of-age tale, which was shortlisted for Canada's Governor General's Award. The story is told in retrospect by Piscine Molitor Patel (named for a swimming pool, thereafter fortuitously nicknamed "Pi"), years after he was shipwrecked when his parents, who owned a zoo in India, were attempting to emigrate, with their menagerie, to Canada. During 227 days at sea spent in a lifeboat with a hyena, an orangutan, a zebra, and a 450-pound Bengal tiger (mostly with the latter, which had efficiently slaughtered its fellow beasts), Pi found serenity and courage in his faith: a frequently reiterated amalgam of Muslim, Hindu, and Christian beliefs. The story of his later life, education, and mission rounds out, but does not improve upon, the alternately suspenseful and whimsical account of Pi's ordeal at sea—which offers the best reason for reading this otherwise preachy and somewhat redundant story of his Life.

(*Kirkus* Reviews, May 1, 2002)

VOYA Reviews: (2003 June) It sounds like the start of a bad joke: A boy, a zebra, a hyena, an orangutan, and a tiger are stranded on a lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific. The format makes it clear from the beginning who survives, but it is the how that propels the reader, as Pi's voice emerges with an as-told-to memoir quality that relays the tale of a young man who explores a variety of faiths and learns much about human nature through watching the animals at his father's zoo. Everything he discovers through his observations becomes applicable in the oceanic adventure that takes place after the sinking of the ship carrying his family and a few select specimens from the zoo toward a better life in North America. Although ordinarily science and religion are at odds, the lessons learned through spirituality and biology become Pi's salvation. The novel takes an allegorical twist when Pi reveals that his highly imaginative tale of animals corresponds to a more horrific one, peopled with family and crew from the sunken ship. The plot hooks, the writing is vivid, and the tone is engaging after a slow start. Although the gore and physicality are not for the weak of stomach or faint of heart, teens who enjoy reading to learn something about the world around them or themselves will delight in this Booker Prize-winning novel.-Beth Gallaway. 4Q 2P S A/YA Copyright 2003 VOYA Reviews